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Recalling the Bay of Pigs

Bethesda.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago today the worst covert-action fiasco in American history occurred when a brigade of CIA-sponsored Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs.

The memory of that day haunts

By David Atlee Phillips

me because I was one of the CIA officers who planned the operation. But I recall more vividly and painfully the 19th of April, 1961, when after two days we knew the defeat was beyond salvage. In Washington we listened to the final radio report from the Cuban commander on the beach. His invasion force of 1,400 Cuban exiles had been routed. He reported that he was standing in the shallows, that he was about to abandon his gear and head for the swamp.

Then he cursed the United States government, and he cursed us as individuals.

The question about the Bay of Pigs most frequently asked — particularly by those who were young or not even born at the time — is a simple one: Why did it fail?

There is no simple, single answer.

Some history should be set straight. It has often been argued that the root cause of the disaster was that the CIA promised President Eisenhower and, after his inauguration, President Kennedy that a spontaneous uprising would be sparked in Cuba by the landing at the Bay of Pigs. That has become a durable myth; but it is a myth. The Bay of Pigs operational plan was based on the 1954 successful covert action, in which I was also involved, that led to the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala. No one in a responsible position ever contemplated a sudden victory in the Guatemalan endeavor. And it didn't occur until enough Guatemalans were convinced the invading army was well entrenched and the time had arrived to hop on the bandwagon. Nor, in the Cuban operation did anyone from the lowest operator to the Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles, believe that immediate uprisings would topple the charismatic Fidel Castro.

Then why did it fail? For the first few years after the Bay of Pigs my observations were too subjective to be trusted. In 1975, however, I mustered as much objectivity as I could to list four principal reasons for the failure:

□ First, Kennedy's political advisers successfully argued that the CIA's original plan to land at a small town called Trinidad near Cuban mountains would make the operation unacceptably "noisy"; thus the change to the isolated, swampy landing site at the Bay of Pigs.

□ Next, the ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, was not thoroughly informed of pre-invasion air strikes against Cuba. CIA sorties by exile pilots who claimed they were defecting from Castro's air force. Stevenson was understandably incensed after he denied charges by Cuba's foreign minister that the planes were on CIA-supported missions. His protest to Kennedy, who admired him, might have been critical in the decision to truncate the operation.

□ Then, those of us within CIA — including Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell, the senior action officer of the operation — should have ignored the agency's "can do" and "good soldier" tradition and told the White House that an operation of the dimensions of the Bay of Pigs, if to be conducted at all, should be managed openly by the Pentagon and not by a secret army.

□ Finally, Kennedy decided at zero hour to cancel the air cover which the 1,400 Cuban exiles in the invasion amphibious force had been promised.

Now, after pondering the sad event for another decade, I must add a fifth element to the list of reasons. Among those concerned with the operation in CIA, there was a tacit assumption — which hardened into certainty by D-Day — that John Kennedy would bail out CIA if things went awry. Everyone, including Richard Bissell and Allen Dulles, believed deep down that Kennedy would rescue the operation with U.S. armed forces if need be. There had to be some sort of overt military option ready in the wings if defeat loomed. (Surely Eisenhower would have had one in reserve and used it.) But there was no contingency plan in fact or in Kennedy's mindset. Those involved in the project, from top to bottom, ignored an intelligence basic: don't assume; know.

For those who demand a simple explanation of the Bay of Pigs debacle and for those who will not entertain the thesis that there was sufficient blame to share among everyone concerned, perhaps the curious incident of Fidel Castro not making a speech should be recalled.

In a crowded press conference, one of the first American newsmen to visit Havana after the Bay of Pigs asked Castro, "Why did the Americans fail?" Everyone expected one of Castro's customary lengthy political diatribes. Instead, Castro shrugged and replied simply, "They had no air support."

Years after the event a man who had worked with me on the project explained what he had decided about the Bay of Pigs. "It was inevitable," he said. "The fiasco, I mean. The disaster. If it hadn't been the Bay of Pigs it would have been something else sometime in the future. In 1953 Kermit Roosevelt and a few fellows manipulated that crowd which toppled Mossadegh in Iran without any trouble at all. Then in 1954 we took care of Eisenhower's little problem in Guatemala. So easy, it seemed. All those successes just had to lead to a failure eventually, because the system kept calling on us for more and more even when it should have been obvious that secret shenanigans couldn't do what armies are supposed to do."

"If it hadn't been that time at the Bay of Pigs," he concluded, "it would have been somewhere else at some other time."

We didn't call them that in 1961, but the exiles stranded on the beach at the Bay of Pigs were our "contras." We should have scrapped the operation or, once committed to it followed through with enough support that our "contras" would never have only the sole option of heading for the swamp.

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